

Sybil Brand/Brand panel's jail oversight role could end

By Sarah Favel
sarah.favel@latimes.com
@sarahfavel on Twitter

A commission that for more than half a century has provided an extra layer of inspection of county jails, police station lockups and juvenile probation camps may be facing its demise.

The Sybil Brand Commission, established in 1959 and named for the famed Los Angeles philanthropist, could be the last casualty of the overhaul of oversight of the Sheriff's Department that the Board of Supervisors has ordered in recent years.

According to a report delivered last week to the supervisors, the commission may not be "operating at maximum efficiency."

The 2014-2015 civil grand jury found that the commission should

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conduct additional and more comprehensive jail inmate and staff interviews while inspecting the jails.

But another group, established to make recommendations on the structure of a new oversight commission of the Sheriff's Department, reported to the supervisors that the board should reconsider the role of the Sybil Brand Commission because the oversight commission would also inspect the jails as part of its duties.

"The working group believes there may be considerable overlap between the role of the Sybil Brand Commission and some of the potential responsibilities of the new commission," the group reported to the board.

Attorney Dean Hansell, who chaired the working group on the Civilian Oversight Commission, said the duties of the Sybil Brand Commission could be divided into the oversight commission and the probation commission, and the resources used by the Sybil Brand Commission could be saved.

The executive office of the Board of Supervisors responded to the grand jury findings that the commission is reviewing its processes for inspecting jail facilities to minimize inspections in a

more effective manner," according to a report released last week.

What does Sybil do?

The 10-member commission consists of two appointees from each supervisor. It was founded in 1959 by Brand, who wanted to improve overcrowded conditions of the jails, especially women's jails. Each commission member is expected to conduct two inspections and attend weekly meetings. Once a month, representatives attend from the probation, children and family services, auditor-controller, internal services and mental health departments.

The commission spends most of its efforts inspecting juvenile group homes. The grand jury reported that representatives from probation and children and family services consider the commission's inspections to be a "valuable addition."

The commission only reports to the Board of Supervisors, but the practice is to work with children and family services and probation to get homes in compliance.

However, the value of the commission when it comes to inspecting the jails is not as clear.

The grand jury reported that when a Sheriff's Department representative was asked how the commission benefits the Sheriff's Department, "he didn't provide an

answer."

No role

Despite yearly inspection the commission played a role in detecting or resolving the problems identified at Men's Central Jail in downtown Los Angeles, the grand jury found.

An ACLU report in 2011 noted that the jail was an "aging, decrepit facility" and inmates experienced "gross unsanitary conditions."

"This is troubling to at least some of the SBC commissioners, and they are getting thoughts to what they might do different," the civil grand jury noted.

The ACLU of Southern California has inspected conditions in the jails and conducted interviews with inmates for years. Peter Eliaberg, legal director of the ACLU, said he hasn't seen any evidence of the effectiveness of the Sybil Brand Commission.

"I have no basis to think they've done anything terribly helpful," he said.

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